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THERE IS WATER IN THE WORLD FOR US: THE ENVIRONMENTAL
THEORIES OF ALICE WALKER

By

Janae Lewis Hall
B.A., University of Louisville, 2014
M.A., University of Louisville, 2018

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Pan-African Studies

Department of Pan-African Studies
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2018

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A Thesis Approved on

April 6, 2018

by the following Thesis Committee:

Dr. Mawuena Kossi Logan

Dr. Priscilla McCutcheon

Dr. David Anderson

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Mr. Mickey Lee Lewis

Mrs. Jane Elizabeth Lewis

my brother

Mr. Mickey Lee Lewis II

my husband

John Curtis Hall

and the Earth

who have all given

support, inspiration, and unconditional love

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ABSTRACT

THERE IS WATER IN THE WORLD FOR US: THE ENVIRONMENTAL THEORIES OF ALICE WALKER

Janae Lewis Hall

April 6, 2018

The emergence of African-American Environmental thought responds to the ongoing erasure of Black experiences and their perspectives on nature. Mainstream environmentalism maintains a legacy of perceived innocence and incorruptibility towards the land, while Black Environmentalism demonstrates the limitations of that ideology. Limitations include the erasure of history in regards to stealing land from Indigenous people, the brutality of slavery, legalized lynching, forced removal from the land, exploitation in sharecropping, destruction of sacred lands, heavy pollution in urban centers, and harmful environmental policies. For Black and Indigenous peoples, it is impossible to view American soil as innocent.

This project surveyed the scholarship of prominent intellectuals within the growing field of African-American Environmental Thought and Ecofeminist Thought. Several scholars have examined the relational aspect of African Americans to their natural environment in the realms of environmental justice, poetry, and scholarship. However, few have considered the work of Alice Walker as fundamental texts towards an

understanding of African Americans and their environment, particularly as it relates to healing and connection towards the self, community, and nature.

In addition, I performed an environmentally based content analysis on the work of Alice Walker, specifically, her work in novel the *Meridian*. Her theory examines the tension that emerges between nature and identity, as Walker believes environmental alienation is a result of the devastating effects of oppression and her views offers reclamations of that very relationship. In addition to identifying her environmental theory, this project asked in what ways does Walker's environmental thought emerge within *Meridian* and other poems and how does this concept guide the characters to define themselves in relation to nature, especially in the midst of environmental alienation, and what suggestions, if at all, do they offer towards the mending of that relationship? The primary fictional work that I utilize is Walker's novel *Meridian*, with a few selected poems from *Her Blue Body Everything We Know* and *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*. In addition, this project explores Alice Walker's environmental ideology as presented in her non-fiction work *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, with supporting insights from *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* and *The World Has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker* in the hopes of uncovering how Alice Walker came into her own understanding regarding the relationship among the environment, the self, and community. This served as a catalyst for deeper insight into the offerings she makes towards healing, connection, and reclamation with the goal of gaining awareness of how those themes become apparent in her fiction.

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INTRODUCTION:

THERE IS WATER IN THE WORLD FOR US

There is water in the
world for us brought by
our friends
though the rock of mother
and god vanishes sand
and we, cast out alone
to heal
and re-create
ourselves
(*Meridian*, 219)

Historically, within environmental mainstream thought, contributions by Black intellectuals are often omitted. When Black people do appear within environmental scholarship, the discourse centers on African-American's disregard, neglect, or lack of concern regarding nature. Additionally, traditional environmental theorists define their relationship to nature as one that is preserved, serene, innocent, and in need of protection from human interference. Embedded within this ideology is a lack of consideration towards people of color and their long - often turbulent- relationship with nature. African-American environmental theory recognizes that due to slavery, Jim Crow, legalized lynching, and other acts of terror, Black people were never able to view the land as serene, innocent, or a place to be preserved. Further, environmental activism for Black people typically centered around the idea of access and cooperation with the land as opposed to a tradition of preservation. Due to their toil and labor on the land, Black people have had and still have an intimate understanding of the environment. African American Environmental theorists argue that Black people are far from negligent when it

comes to nature as Black environmentalist activism can be dated back as far as the Progressive era.

The goal of my project is to perform an environmentally based content analysis on the work of Alice Walker. The focus of the project will define Walker's environmental theory and seek to understand how her theories become evident in the novel *Meridian* as well as various selections of her poetry. My thesis examines the tension that emerges between nature and identity, as Walker believes environmental alienation is a result of the devastating effects of oppression, and yet, demonstrates how her theory offers reclamations of that very relationship. In other words, in what ways does Walker's environmental thought emerge within *Meridian* and other poems and how does this concept guide the characters to define themselves in relation to nature, especially in the midst of environmental alienation, and what suggestions, if at all, do they offer towards the mending of that relationship? The primary fictional work that I will be utilizing include Walker's novel *Meridian*, with a few selected poems from *Her Blue Body Everything We Know* and *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*. In addition, this project will explore Alice Walker's environmental ideology as presented in her non-fiction work *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, with supporting insights from *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* and *The World Has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker* in the hopes of uncovering how Alice Walker came into her own understanding regarding the relationship among the environment, the self, and community. This will serve as a catalyst for deeper insight into the offerings she makes towards healing, connection, and reclamation with the goal of gaining awareness of how those themes become apparent in her fiction.

An environmental reading of Alice Walker functions as a contribution to traditional environmental scholarship and Black environmental thought. Walker's exploration of the strained, albeit significant, relationship between Black people and nature will serve as a critique of mainstream environmental theory, which maintains a privileged approach towards humans and their relationship to the land. Further, an environmental analysis of Walker's fictional work will contribute to the growing discipline of Black environmental thought. As the scholarship on Black people and the environment has grown, little attention has been given to Alice Walker and the ways in which her work explores and relates to nature. The work of Alice Walker will continue to propel the scholarship forward by introducing analysis of the interrelationships among identity, culture, healing, and nature.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

African American Environmental Thought

The literature review includes a survey of prominent scholars in the African American Environmentalist Thought tradition and Ecofeminist literature in order to provide an introduction to the key concepts and ideas within the disciplines. Within the African American Environmentalist scholarship, I use the literature review to showcase the scholars that specifically examine the relationship between Black people and nature, as opposed to other themes such as environmental policy, legislation, and systemic issues such as pollution, toxic waste, and climate change. Although these factors are present in the majority of the scholars' work, I limited my scope towards the examination of the relationship and offerings towards the celebration, healing, and reclamation of a connection with the environment. In addition, within the Ecofeminist literature, I use the literature review to provide insight on how scholars of the field explore the relationship between women and the environment.

In *African American Environmental Thought*, environmentalist Kimberly Smith provides a definition of Black environmental thought as "a set of ideas concerning the relationship between humans and the natural environment, including the norms that ought to govern that relationship" (Smith, 3). In her work, Smith provides the main themes

associated with African American environmental theory: freedom, equality, and the devastating effects racial oppression has on the livelihoods of Black people and their natural environments. She explains that African-American environmental theory examines the relationship between Black people and the natural world and maintains that, due to centuries of racial and environmental racism, Black people write about the environment in a different way. I believe what makes the approaches of African-American environmental scholars different is that they do not omit how racial oppression highly influences and interferes with their experiences with nature. African-American environmental thought recognizes that difference between mainstream environmentalism and black environmentalism.

According to Smith, mainstream environmental thought exalts ideals of preservation in regards to the relationship between humans and the earth. Mainstream naturalist theory promotes that nature should be treated and left as pristine, which is characterized as a romanticized, pastoral view of nature. However, I believe Black environmentalists differ in their approach towards understanding the environment. Ideals regarding access, living in harmony with the land, and environmental activism distinguish African-American environmental theory as distinctively different than the mainstream. Smith states, "The black tradition, in contrast, highlights an older, less romantic theme in Western thought, conceptualizing the American landscape not as pristine and innocent wilderness but as a corrupted land in need of redemption. Humans, in turn, are to be active, creative, co-equal partners in giving meaning to and redeeming the natural world" (Smith, 8). Smith continues to explain that the central theme/question

for Black environmentalists is not how to protect the natural world, but instead how to have a morally responsible and beneficial interaction in relationship to nature.

Further, I argue that embedded in the ideology of African-American Environmental Thought is the examination of the interrelationships among nature, identity, and culture. Moreover, black environmental theorists agree that connecting with nature promotes a vital creative energy and life force that helps foster a connection between the self and the community. This idea is fleshed out through the conceptualization and reexamination of the term "possession" and what possession means for Black people. According to Smith, possession meant more than the one-dimensional Eurocentric definition, which focuses on acquiring wealth. Land possession for Black people meant connection to community and membership. Smith explains that this perspective of land possession extends to creativity, harmony, and cultural production. She states,

the land could be a source of creative energy, the particular manifestation of universal life-force. Possessing the land means coming into contact with the creative energy animating nature, and letting that vital force guide cultural production... under this view, possessing the land has to do with creating a folk culture "in harmony" with the natural landscape: a culture conducive to a group's survival and flourishing. (Smith, 9)

In the article "On Black Nature: African American Poets Reflect," African American Environmentalist and Nature poet Camille Dungy echoes the sentiments introduced by Smith that Black poets have long been ignored and dismissed in environmental thought. For Dungy, erasure exists in the world of natural poetry. She explains that erasure from the mainstream narrative and confrontations with racism shift the perspectives of literary scholarship from Black naturalist poets. She states, "Given the history of race-related violence, geographic displacement, and de-humanization in this

country, is it any wonder Black American poets' treatments of the natural world are often colored by skepticism and anxiety?" (Dungy, 761). Dungy believes this is one of the main contributing factors towards the exclusion of Black people from natural poetry, and by extension mainstream environmental thought. Due to this tumultuous history, little room is left for the experience of beauty through nature or reflective walks through the woods. However, she argues, such reflection on beauty exists within Black nature poets. In fact, a relationship to the beauty of nature has existed dating back to the first Black poet in America, Phillis Wheatley. Her argument presents that, although laced with elements of skepticism and anxiety, diverse expressions of nature poetry exist within the words of Black nature poets that can enrich the environmental theorist tradition. Unique approaches to themes such as politics, history, culture, sublimity, environmental reform, and ecological justice are all expressed within the works of Black nature poets.

Accordingly, Dungy criticizes the tradition of nature poetry, as she believes the genre's allegiance to a pastoral tradition serves to continuously omit the experiences and perspectives of Black people. Further, in her book *Black Nature* (the first anthology published featuring over four hundred poems by Black nature poets), Dungy explores how Black writers approach nature writing in a different way. She states, "The poems reveal histories stored in various natural bodies. They document natural and human-provoked disasters and their effects on individuals and communities. They explore sources of connection to, but also alienation from, the land." (Dungy, xxii). *Black Nature* documents the history of black poetry in America and presents the myriad of ways the poets have come to an understanding of their natural environment. Dungy argues that a majority of poets relate to their natural environment in incredibly

diverse ways. Some poems, such as Carl Phillip's "White Dog", suggest there is no connection between human and animal, which is deeply rooted in combatting the historic comparisons of Black people to animals, thus justifying the mistreatment of African Americans throughout time. However, poems such as Anne Spencer's "White Things" and Alice Walker's "The Flowers" situate humans intimately within their natural environment, drawing connections and reflections from the natural world to the human world. Dungy states, "Via indirect and direct comparison, the authors in this collection draw correlations between what happens to the rest of Earth's communities and what might happen to our own" (Dungy, xxiv).

Black Nature is broken into thematic cycles of poems that connect the differing themes of Black nature poets throughout time. Dungy's work touches on the notion of healing and rejuvenation through nature. Elements of natural healing arise in cycles one and cycles ten in the anthology. Cycle one, titled "Just Looking", focuses on African American recognition of the beauty derived from nature. Poets such as Lucille Clifton, Al Young, and Robert Hayden expound on the profound beauty that can be discovered only in nature. However, these renderings of beauty are written with the awareness of the complexities that the beauty of the natural world possesses. Dungy writes, "In poems that consciously address the creative process, such poets as Alvin Aubert and Rachel Eliza Griffiths warn against reducing the realities of the natural world in an attempt to conform to a potentially vapid lyric landscape tradition. The poets in this cycle all suggest that they are not cowed by the magnitude of the natural world. They are able to appreciate nature on its own terms" (Dungy, xxx). In other words, for some poets, the sublimity experienced as a result of an encounter with nature does not distract from the tension that

arises from encounters with nature and its particularly turbulent history in regards to African Americans. Similarly, Cycle ten, named "Comes Always Spring", connects with the thematic writings of beauty in cycle one. Cycle ten ends the anthology with poems reminiscent of hope of renewal, regeneration, and growth despite the troubled history between Black people and American soil. Poets such as Margaret Walker, Claudia Rankine, and Tim Seibles suggest a future filled with regenerations and connections regarding Blacks and their relationship towards nature.

Like Dungy's work, Dianne D. Glave extends the scholarship regarding Black people's relationship to the land. Her work *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* traces the history of African Americans' attunement to nature and documents the innumerable ways Black people have functioned as naturalists since their forced arrival on American soil. Glave's work emphasizes the distinctive ways that African Americans have come to understand the natural world around them. She states that an African-American environmental perspective differs from mainstream environmentalism as Black people focus on the physical location of nature as much as the people that occupy those spaces. In distinguishing the African-American environmental tradition, Glave states, "What makes the environmental experience of African Americans distinctive? Enslaved people did not stumble upon or discover wilderness. Instead, African Americans actively sought healing, kinship, resources, escape, refuge, and salvation in the land. The environment held social meaning for enslaved people" (Glave, 8). Glave conceptualizes the implications of Black people as workers of land as (opposed to owners) and explains that this laborious aspect highly influenced Black people's perspectives on the land. Glave explains that Black people never possessed a sense of

entitlement to the lands they were forced to cultivate, a concept that derives from highly European ideals. Instead, pride, sacredness, and knowledge functioned as a form of ownership and connection for Black people in respect to the land. Glave uses the example of the burial of loved ones in land that was not owned by them. Thus, although the land did not technically belong to them in terms of property, a sacred bond was cultivated throughout the land through the form of an ancestral burial tradition. Glave argues that ancestral burials in land that was not considered "property" is one of the many ways Black people have come into their own understanding and connection to the land they were forced to work. She argues that these very traditions have served as justification to ignore the perspectives of Black naturalists, as a relationship to land that does not contain ownership of that property operates outside of the white conceptualization of wilderness and nature.

Glave's work builds on that of Dungy's as she specifically traces the origins of the complicated relationship between African Americans and the land from its origination in the Atlantic Slave Trade all the way through the current environmental racism Black people are experiencing in the present day. Glave states, "Scorn, distaste, and fear of nature became the emotional legacy of a people who had been kidnapped from their homelands and forced to make the long journey across the Atlantic Ocean to pick cotton and prime tobacco for often violent and abusive masters, they were finally subjected to losing legally owned land to the whites who continued to victimize them long after slavery was banned" (Glave, 5). She covers topics such as the devastating health and environmental impact the Middle Passage had on African people, the myriad ways in which African Americans navigated the southern terrains, the rich spiritual

tradition that emerged from encounters with the natural world, and the utilization of the wilderness as a source of refuge and resistance. She delves into the topics of women and gardening, and how gardening was used as a creative outlet for enslaved women, and how elements of those traditions have continued to this day. Glave's work ends with an address to the environmental justice movement and African-Americans' placement within the movement. Glave argues that despite the continued environmental racism and alienation experienced by the majority of Blacks in America, hope for an improved environmental future is evident. Glave states, "In response to being inequitably exposed to toxic chemicals, waste, and environmental devastation caused by nature, however, African Americans have continued their legacy of resistance, combining grassroots activism, spirituality, and organization to craft a 'spearhead for reform' that African Americans who continue to be embattled by environmental racism can carry into the future" (Glave, 138).

I assert that environmental scholars Carolyn Finny, Katherine, McKittrick, and Clyde Woods contribute to the work set forth by Dungy and Glave. Carolyn Finney's *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans and the Outsides* subscribes to a similar tradition as the previously stated scholars. Her work grounds itself in the challenging of the idea that the environment is a "race free" space. Much like Dungy and Glave, Finney critiques the modern environmentalist movement and their ongoing efforts to marginalize the contributions of Black naturalist scholars. Finney's work utilizes a multidimensional approach towards the main arguments and themes in *Black Faces, White Spaces*. She employs elements of critical race theory, feminist theory, and personal standpoint theory to analyze themes such as exclusion,

invisibility, marginalization, and environmental racism. Most notably, Finney's work emphasizes the current creative response of Black people in an attempt to address and combat environmental alienation. Finney believes that creation and creativity are the main driving forces that allowed for Black people to endure, confront, and transform their experiences of oppression. Finney elaborates in stating, "But our resilience becomes multidimensional and explosive with possibilities because of what we believe we can create. And creation does not exist in a vacuum... We come to understand how people create, attain hope, and move forward. Our mutual responsibility is to see those differences and recognize the possibilities and be fearless enough to bring those possibilities into our realities" (Finney, 134).

In the collection of essays in *Black Geographies and The Politics of Place*, edited by environmental scholars Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, the conversation regarding African Americans in relation to the natural environment branches into a contemporary view. Focusing on the dynamics of the diaspora and geography, *Black Geographies* explores the dynamics of space and place as it pertains to those impacted by events such as Hurricane Katrina, forced migrations, and the cultural dynamics of African Americans as they occupy particular geographical spaces. This anthology, much like the plethora of other works dedicated to African American environmentalism, centers its themes on the diverse approaches by African and African Americans and their perspectives towards the environment. McKittrick and Woods update the conversation by introducing topics such as reparations, memorialization, and urban revolutions. In addition, the conversation extends towards places across the world such as the Caribbean, British Columbia, Mexico, and India.

Katherine McKittrick expands on topics introduced in *Black Geographies* in her work *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and The Cartographies of Struggle*. McKittrick propels the scholarship forward as her work provides an intersectional approach towards geography, women's studies, and Black studies. I argue *Demonic Grounds* employs the work of geographers and feminist scholars such as Ruth Gilmore, Linda Peake, Sylvia Winter, Carole Boyce Davis, and Iris Young to highlight the dynamics embedded in a gendered geographical study of Black people's relationship to the land. McKittrick's work focuses on the struggles and activism of Black women in relation to their environment, and describes how Black women have continuously influenced geographical spaces. In particular, McKittrick explores how Black women occupied, interpreted, interacted, and influenced their environmental surroundings even as they occupied demeaning spaces such as the plantation, auction, block, and slave ships. Overall, I suggest McKittrick's work proves important as it is one of the first of its kind to delve into the specific ways in which women have interacted with the earth. Specifically, I believe McKittrick's main argument rests in the belief that a reexamination of women and their perspectives towards the environment must occur. She argues that held within the stories of women lies a wealth of knowledge that serves to benefit the field of naturalist studies and has the potential to create a more inclusive approach to human geography. In reiterating the importance of studying women, race, and geography McKittrick states, "Thus, black women's geographies push up against the seemingly natural spaces and places of subjugation, disclosing, sometimes radically, how geography is socially produced and therefore an available site through which various forms of blackness can be understood and asserted" (McKittrick, xix).

Ecofeminist Thought

Pamela Smith's *Environmental Ethics* provides a concise overview of the major schools of thought in contemporary environmental ethics. Incorporated within her work are theories on the topics of animal rights, environmental holism, and various other eco-theological concerns. Most important for this project, *Environmental Ethics* introduces a theory known as ecofeminism. In the chapter called "The Ethics of Feminism", Smith outlines the theoretical makeup of the fairly new concept of ecofeminism. Smith documents the origins of the term from its conception in 1974 by ecofeminist scholar Francoise D' Eaubonne and traces its theoretical development to contemporary times. Elements such as eco-destruction, androcentrism (described as the predominance of the masculine and macho), vitalism, and ecological ethics are all held within the many different ways scholars have come to define ecofeminism. The feminism aspect of ecofeminism stems from the predominant idea that the degradation of the natural world in a patriarchal society has, both figuratively and literally, a direct negative impact on the wellbeing of women. Thus, ecofeminism is the simultaneous fight for both the fight for the rights of women and for environmental integrity. Some branches of ecofeminism extend to include other marginalized groups oppressed by patriarchal systems. Smith states, "Ecofeminism's wide-ranging concerns include nature, marginalized peoples, social and cultural systems, structure of thinking, and the well-being of all that lives" (Smith, 33).

Further, ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant's describes ecofeminism as, sex, and age barriers have been eliminated and basic human needs have been fulfilled... an adequate environmental ethic will be feminist, ecologically informed, historically aware, and

resistant. It will also be appreciative of the local, the traditional, and the sacred" (Merchant, 21). Merchant's definition also branches into non-patriarchal expressions of spirituality and religion as she believes this is one of the major contributors towards the ongoing destruction of the earth and, by extension, women. Merchant traces her definition back to the origins of the shift towards a science dominated society and how this shift changed the dynamic of humans viewing themselves as equals to nature towards being dominators of nature. In discussing Merchant's theory Smith states, "she believes, to the mathematical, techno-mechanical, scientific view which, coupled with the upsurge of an individualistic, atomistic political anthropology, increasingly emphasized the conquest of nature" (Smith, 20). According to Merchant, the shift towards viewing nature as an entity subject to conquest, and thus controlled, negatively impacted the ways in which women were viewed, as women had historically been viewed with a deep connection to the earth. Merchant believes that several religions in modern society celebrate the conquest and dominance of nature and that this view prevents society from becoming true caretakers (not dominators) of nature and continuously justifies the mistreatment of women.

Similarly, I argue that Sallie McFague's ecofeminism definition denounces the science-based ideology introduced through the Enlightenment as well as the religions that support a narrow, male-dominated, Western perspective. McFague's definition of ecofeminism centers on the human body as an agent of radical social, ecological, and environmental change. McFague suggests that reinvestment in the sacredness of the body has the potential to manifest solidarity and healing amongst the creatures and humans of the world. She conceptualizes that the male-Western ideology relies heavily on the

transcendence of the body as a worthy pursuit of life. However, this has negative ramifications for the wellbeing of the inhabitants of earth as, under this dominant and pervasive philosophy, life on earth is viewed with diminished importance, thus, making it permissible for earth's inhabitants to be mistreated. In order to combat this superior and arrogant way of thinking, I suggest McFague's ecofeminist theory emphasizes sacredness of both the human and nonhumans of this earth as a way to diminish oppression and exploitation. In this way, value is placed back on earth as opposed to an abstract transcended reality or afterlife. McFague argues that an effective ecofeminist theory must be both biocentric and cosmocentric, meaning that an obligation to the wellness of the body has the potential to have positive biological, ecological, and cosmological implications and will ultimately lead to the improved treatment of women. McFague states, "What needs to be corrected is the long tradition of love-hate, admiration-fear which has been directed towards the body and the physical world in Western Christian culture, a fierce ambivalence epitomized in the simultaneous "worship and loathing" of female bodies" (McFague, 23).

Finally, I argue, Rosemary Radford Ruether's ecofeminist theory proves relevant towards the approach and understanding of this project. Much like McFague, Ruether asserts that a reclamation of the sacred is an essential aspect for ecofeminist theory, and is needed to propel humanity towards a better treatment of the natural environment and women. Like Warren, Ruether believes that the shift from equality with nature to domination has negatively impacted the relationships humans have with their environment, other humans, and women. Ruether's definition of ecofeminism emphasizes the healing properties of the earth and the benefits of viewing

the earth, which she uses interchangeably with the word Gaia, and views the earth as the main source of creative energy. Ruether states, "The perception of the Earth as Gaia, a living, energetic, creative system - indeed, an all-embracing organism (so named after the Earth goddess of the Greeks) - and the perception of Gaia as 'matrix of life' can be formative, not of a spirituality of self-abnegation or ego-renunciation but, rather, of the merging of 'small selves' and the 'surrender' of self which Earth-healing requires" (Ruether, 25) Ruether's emphasis on the sacredness of earth and its healing properties provide a solid theoretical framework for understanding Walker's environmental thought.

In *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ecofeminist Carol Adams provides a definition of ecofeminism focused on social justice. Arguably, Adam's interpretation of ecofeminism encapsulates the diverse and unique ways women have responded to human oppression and environmental abuse. Adams provides a succinct description of the theory in stating, "Ecofeminism identifies the twin dominations of women and the rest of nature. To the issues of sexism, racism, and classism, and heterosexism that concern feminist, ecofeminist add naturism - the oppression of the rest of nature. Ecofeminism argues that the connections between the oppression of women and the rest of nature must be recognized to understand adequately both oppressions" (Adams, 1).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework includes the critique of the scholarship I surveyed and positionality on the analysis of Alice Walker's work. For scholars of the African American Environmental Tradition, my main critique includes the exclusion of Alice Walker in their work. Few have referred to the work of Alice Walker as fundamental

texts towards an understanding of African Americans and their environment, particularly as it relates to an understanding of healing and connection towards the self, community, and nature. Additionally, in ecofeminist literature my main critique speaks to ecofeminist scholars' lack of inclusion or consideration of race.

Several scholars have examined the relation of African Americans to their natural environments in the realms of environmental justice, poetry, and scholarship. However, few have considered the works of Alice Walker as fundamental texts towards an understanding of African Americans and their environment, particularly as it relates to an understanding of healing and connection of the self, community, and nature. Undoubtedly, *Black Nature* successfully highlights the diverse approaches towards nature amongst Black nature poets throughout history. However, in terms of natural relational healing little is said.

Dungy states that in *Black Nature*, "The majority of the works in this collection incorporate treatments of the natural world that are historicized or politicized and are expressed through the African American perspective, which inclines readers to consider these texts as political poems, historical poems, protest poems, socioeconomic commentary" (Dungy, xxvii). However, works by Alice Walker are not included in the sections regarding healing, rejuvenation, and hope. In the plethora of nature poets, most of whose work is repeated several times, Walker's work is mentioned only once in the anthology. Her powerful and profound poem "The Flowers" appears in cycle five of the anthology entitled "Forsaken of Earth." Although Walker's "The Flowers" situates itself rather nicely within the themes represented in cycle five - themes of environmental harm, trauma, and alienation - it is the only time her work is mentioned, and she is left out of

the cycles incorporated in healing, reclamation, rejuvenation - which a lot of her work centers on and features. I believe this project continues the work pioneered by Dungy by highlighting Walker, to reinforce the notion that her work provides reflections on the environment and provide unique considerations towards nature.

Similarly, I argue that Glave's work is unique as she combines a traditional approach to discussing environmental history - which typically utilizes ecology, geography, and history - with elements of African/African-American literature, art, and individualized stories. She hopes to challenge traditional scholarship that customarily relies on the Eurocentric approaches towards understanding nature in the hopes of proving that "long before the birth of the modern environmental movement, African Americans practiced environmentalism through the lenses of religion, agriculture, gardening, and nature study" (Glave, 10). By incorporating different perspectives through art, stories, literature of farmers, artists, and novelists from the South, Glave contributes to the growing African-American environmental tradition.

Although Glave employs the perspective of novelists, Walker's fiction is omitted from the contributions of Black naturalist writers. Although mentioned in the chapter regarding insight on Black women gardening traditions, in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, nothing is mentioned of Walker's fictional work and how her writing contributes to the growing literature of Black environmentalism and naturalism. Alice Walker provides a unique perspective through her literary art that deals with the themes outlined in Glave's work. This project contributes to the work outlined by Glave, as Walker's fiction and poetry deal specifically with the ways her characters have come into a relational understanding of land they do not possess, most notably in her

work *Meridian*. Additionally, and particularly present in her non-fiction and poetic work, Walker incorporates themes of sacredness, spirituality, and healing in regard to the environment.

Similarly, I would argue, McKittrick's work propels the scholarship on African-American environmental literature forward in groundbreaking ways. Her emphasis on women, race, and place come together in a coherent way that sheds light on the numerous experiences and perspectives of Black women and their environment. However, although many Black women scholars and novelists are mentioned as integral to the budding knowledge of African-American environmental thought, Alice Walker's work is not mentioned throughout the text. Walker's work is highly concerned with the link between women, race, and place yet her work in this field is widely ignored.

Smith's introduction of African American Environmental theory proves particularly applicable to this project, as the majority of Alice Walker's work explores the themes embedded within this school of thought. Walker's work specifically examines the strained relationship between self, community, and the environment and, like this theory, traces the strain back to the racial and environmental oppression experienced by Black people in relation to their environments. Furthermore, Walker's work is saturated with themes regarding the renewal and reward that can be experienced when positive encounters with nature occur. Finally, African American environmental theory proves helpful to this project, as Walker's work speaks to the creative life force of nature and its power to reconnect people to themselves, others, and the environment. Further, according to Smith, Black environmentalism recognizes that positive interaction with nature is critical for a good and healthy life for Black people. Due to this fact, Black naturalists

agree that fighting for this positive interaction is a worthwhile cause for the continued improvement of the conditions of Black people and a way to work out the historically tense relationship Black people have had with the land. Understanding this aspect to the African-American environmental theoretical approach is integral to approaching Walker's work, as her dealings with nature lean heavily on redemptive interactions with nature as a means of healing.

Utilizing Smith's environmental theory will assist in fleshing out and understanding the ideas presented by Walker in her fictional work and further establish her writing as one that is worthy of consideration as a major contribution to the growing field of African American Environmental Thought. Smith's theory resembles other critics in the field, such as Dungy, Glave, and Finney, in recognizing the tense relationship between Black people and the land and suggesting remedies such as positive environmental exposure, spiritual renewal, and natural healing as potential avenues towards mending these historically tense relational aspects.

Smith admits that her work does not include how Black women contribute to the budding discipline of African American Environmental thought. In her decision to concentrate on male historical figures in her work Smith states, "Unfortunately, this choice means that my study (like many works on early black political thought) is dominated by male voices... In addition, addressing the specific concerns and perspectives of black women writers - and generally integrating gender issues more fully into this study - would have expanded its scope beyond manageable proportions" (Smith, 7). To make up for the lack of gender analysis in Smith's work, this project will utilize Carol Adams and Pamela Smith's Ecofeminist theory, Kimberlee Crenshaw's

Intersectional Theory, and Alice Walker's Womanist Theory for the interpretations of Alice Walker's work.

Particularly, using Adams theoretical approach to Alice Walker's essays and fiction proves beneficial, as Walker's work teases out the doubling aspect that is present in Adams definition of eco-feminism, which details the link between human oppression and environmental abuse. I believe Walker extends this eco-feminist definition by exploring the relationship between human oppression and environmental alienation. Moreover, Carol Adams' ecofeminist theory can be used to better understand Walker's work in regards to the ways in which she classifies the patriarchy and their ideology of spiritual dualism as one of the main culprits towards the degradation of women, uneasy relationship to the land, and environmental abuse. She states that the idea of dualism – which classifies diversity as either being "A" or "Not A" (as in everything can be categorized as being A or other) - presents a restrictive dichotomy that reinforces a limited and restrictive approach to life. Adams elaborates, "These dualisms represent dichotomy rather than continuity, enacting exclusion rather than inclusion. Ecofeminists analyze many restrictive dualisms that uphold a logic of domination: independence/interdependence; heaven/earth; male/female; culture/nature; mind/body; white/'non-white'; humans/animals; humans/nature" (Adams, 2).

The challenge to patriarchal dualism is a concept within Adams' ecofeminist theory that helps us to better understand the challenges Walker poses to the spiritual domination of Western patriarchy. Like Adams, Walker's work lends itself to fighting against harsh dichotomies in the hopes of restoring and mending the broken relationship among humans, nature, and spirit. In that respect, Adams emphasizes a relational

approach towards healing and repairing the strain imposed on women and the environment by the socially dominant. This theoretical approach proves useful as Walkers' work is centered on relationships between humans, nature, environment, power structures, etc. Adams states, "Ecofeminism stresses relationship, not solely because it has been women's domain, but because it is a more viable ethical framework than autonomy for transforming structures that are environmentally destructive" (Adams, 5). Most important to this project, Adams presentation of ecofeminism is beneficial by stressing the sacredness of relationships as a path towards healing, celebration, and renewal of humans and the environment.

One of the main critiques regarding the definitions outlined by the ecofeminist scholars includes the lack of inclusion or consideration of race. The scholars followed in a traditional fashion of classifying humans as "all one race" and believing that race has no real weight on the issues that emerge due to the mistreatment of women. Additionally, little to no attention is given to the particular ways women of color are mistreated. The conceptualizations of ecofeminism classify women into one group by gender and ignore the differences in treatment that women of color receive. In the hopes of discussing how nature, class, race, and gender interact and coincide with each other – an aspect left out by ecofeminism- I utilize Kimberlee Crenshaw's intersectionality theory.

Crenshaw explains the approach to intersectional theory as follows,

In mapping the intersections of race and gender, the concept does engage dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories. By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable. While the primary intersections that I explore here are between race and gender, the concept can and should be expanded by factoring in issues such as class, sexual orientation, age, and color. (Crenshaw 1244-1245)

I will employ Crenshaw's theory to prove that an environmental understanding of Alice Walker's work cannot be fully understood without examining how race, class, gender, and nature intersect to shape the experiences of the women within her work.

Finally, in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* Alice Walker provides a four-point definition of womanism:

1. From womanish. A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist... 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (*Gardens*, xi).

Walker's creation and definition of womanism proves relevant as the term provides a subcategory in Black feminism and sets the standard for future approaches and interpretations regarding Black women in literature, art, religion, the environment, politics, and the community. Also, I argue womanist theory provides a celebratory lens to examine and understand environmental literature, as this theory recognizes the love that stems from engaging with nature and its transformative powers.

For this project, I utilize definition three of Walker's womanist theory will be utilized to analyze the ways in which Walker's work attempts to find a loving connection to the environment, despite consistent alienation. An emphasis on Walker's creative, celebratory, and sacred approach to environment will function as a basis for

understanding the characters within *Meridian* and the underlying themes and motifs within her poetry. Scholar Pamela Smith extends Walker's womanist theory to include Walker's environmental considerations by introducing the term "ecowomanist." In regards to her poetry and other fictional work Smith states, "These particular womanist poems — and all of Walker's poems are womanist, whatever their subject — are by their very nature eco-womanist. Just as the term 'ecofeminist' expresses the perception that the degradation of the Earth is of a piece with the subordinating and bullying of women, racial minorities, the poor, and the marginalized, the term 'ecowomanist' expresses the burden of this perception on a woman of color" (Smith, 477).

CHAPTER 2

ALICE WALKER'S ENVIRONMENTAL THEORIES

Alice Walker's non-fiction work *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* provides essays regarding her life as an activist, scholar, spiritualist, and environmentalist. This work covers a wide range of topics that includes thoughts on feminism, environmentalism, identity politics, self-discovery, civil-rights movements, and religion. The main purpose of this book is the assertion, by Walker, that she is indeed both a novelist and activist, and that her activism has developed simultaneously with her fiction throughout her career. Joyce Pettis' review of Walker's work highlights the transition from Alice Walker the novelist to Alice Walker the activist novelist in stating, "Out of these truths and an obligatory need to resist indoctrination and to instigate change, Walker, an internationally recognized (and controversial) novelist, essayist, poet, and short fiction writer, becomes Walker an activist. Through mostly previously published statements, essays, speeches, letters, and poems, she communicates an activism that is easily compatible with being a writer" (Pettis, 715). Similarly, in *The World Has Changed*, Walker discusses the role of the artist and the activist combining to envision an improved world. When asked about the artist's responsibility towards change, she states, "... I can't stand the abuse of the planet and the rampant lack of compassion for the Earth. If you want a world where people are concerned about life on the planet, then you have

to be concerned and work for change. But everyone is responsible for the whole creation and the artist has his or her own part to do" (*Conversations*, 72).

In addition to Walker's assertion that she is, in fact, an activist, the overarching theme throughout her book of essays centers on the development of her environmental ideology. I argue that reviewers and scholars of Walker's work often ignore the assertions Walker makes regarding the specific relationship she has towards her environment and the self, and instead use *Anything We Love* as a recap of her contemplations on nature as a *means* to understanding her religious, spiritual, and political musings. In a review of Walker's work, scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin demonstrates the tendency to understate the environmentalism of Alice Walker. In her review, Griffin states, "This collection chronicles her continuing spiritual, creative and political quest and insists upon the necessary and strong relationship between spirituality, activism and art. And here - as in her earlier works - she is both of and ahead of her time. This is an Alice Walker who preaches and teaches reconciliation, who strives to love the humanity and the divine in all beings while fighting vigilantly against the inhumane actions of some of them" (Griffin, 23). Like Griffin, many scholars categorize her work as being highly spiritual and divine with heavy considerations towards earth, humanity, and its other inhabitants. Yet, most fail to specifically address how her work points towards a sophisticated and well developed environmental thought that can be both helpful in contributing to the growing scholarship among African-American environmental theorists and ecofeminists, and also assisting in the better understanding of Black people in relation to nature.

In *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, I've concluded that Alice Walker's environmental thoughts are classified into three main categories: environmental consideration, celebration, and reclamation. In this project, consideration is regarded as awareness, attentiveness, and consciousness specifically in regard to the relationship Black people have with the land, nature, and the environment. This adheres to the African-American environmental thought tradition established by Kimberly Smith, Camille Dungy, and Dianne Glave. Celebration is defined as the pleasure, excitement, rejuvenation, and joy one derives from nature and, according to Walker, what is essential towards a path of healing the self as it is alienated from nature, and by extension, mending that relationship. In understanding celebration, Walker's womanist theory provides insight towards the celebratory aspects of Alice Walker's environmental thought by stating that integral to celebration is love for nature and nature's inhabitants. Finally, Alice Walker's environmental reclamations deal with environmental activism and reparations and further implications for environmental hopes and futures. Ecofeminist Pamela Smith's analysis of Alice Walker's work summarizes the tendency for Alice Walker's consideration, celebration, and reclamation to overlap and feed off each other. Regarding Walker's non-fiction work Smith states, "In her life and art, Walker's pursuit of the freedom to love, to be, to revel, and to rest has led her not only to express life's passion and promise but also to be an advocate for whomever or whatever she perceives to be submerged, subjugated, oppressed" (Smith, 6).

Environmental Consideration

Like ecofeminist scholar Carolyn Merchant, Alice Walker attributes the difficult relationship between Black people and nature to a long tradition of

patriarchal Christianity. In *Anything We Love*, Walker opens the chapter with an introduction called "Belief in the Love of the World" stating, "In it I explore my awareness, beginning in childhood, of the limitations of the patriarchal Christianity into which I was born; as well as my realization, over time, that my most cherished instinctual, natural, self, the pagan self, was in danger of dying from its oppression by an ideology that had been forced on my ancestors, under the threat of punishment or death, and was, for the most part, alien to me" (Walker, xxi). This statement is a prelude to the section title, albeit long, called "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover's Arms): Clear Seeing Inherited Religion and Reclaiming the Pagan Self". This title reveals the tone of Walker's critique and directly ties engaging in an oppressive religion must be a result of being driven mad and alienated from your land.

For Walker, alienation from self, community, and the environment is a direct result of those in power being fearful of nature and Black women. The pervasive fear-based ideology has, according to Walker, kept Black people in bondage and has coerced them away from a belief in themselves and of their natural environment. Walker views herself and her ancestors as "Earthlings growing naturally out of the Universe" (Walker, 4) and explains that this view is antithetical to the predominant way of thinking – a way of thinking that views Black women as a problem and perpetuates a system of oppression and exploitation. In the particular way this manifests for Black women, Walker states, "It is painful to realize they (Black women) were forever trying to correct a 'flaw' - that of being black, female, human- that did not exist, except as 'men of God,' but really men of greed, misogyny, and violence, defined it" (Walker, 4). She expounds on her Earthling

ideology and her frustration with a society that continues to belittle Earth in *The World Has Changed*. She states, "You know, many people are really not at home on Earth. I wish they would just leave right now and stop using our tax money to do it - get on ship or spacecraft and move on out to whatever it is they want to go. Because there are earthlings who *feel* like earthlings and have no desire to go anywhere but to just be here and to really love and worship what is here" (*Conversations*, 137).

In *Anything We Love*, Walker conceptualizes how an oppressive religion maintained a legacy of environmental alienation towards Black people in regards to the community, Black women, and the self. In terms of the Black community, Walker provides a brief history of sharecroppers, their relationship to the land, and how it was jeopardized due to racist ideologies and practices. In describing the plight of the sharecropper and their relation to the land, Walker states:

Because of the criminal exploitation inherent in the sharecropping system - in which the landowner controlled land, seeds, and tools, as well as records of account - sharecroppers were often worse off than slaves, which was the point. Sharecropping was the former slave owner's revenge against black people for having attained their freedom. It is no wonder that under such complete subjugation and outright terrorism, which included rape, beatings, burnings, and being thrown off the land, along with the entrenched Southern custom of lynching, people like my parents sought succor from any God they were forced to have. The idea that as descendants of Africans and Native Americans and Europeans - Scottish and Irish - on both my mother's and father's side, they might choose a God uniquely perceived by themselves, never entered their minds, except negatively. (Walker, 16)

Even after attaining freedom from enslavement, Black people's relationship to the land was tense due to the toilsome nature of sharecropping. Although Black people had an intimate knowledge of the land they were cultivating, lack of ownership placed majority of sharecroppers in a highly vulnerable and exploited position. Walker argues that toilsome labor, in combination with ongoing racism, was the main reason many

Black people embraced, even if half-heartedly, the dominant Christian religion, despite the religion viewing their existence, especially Black women's, as inferior and deserving of mistreatment.

Walker states that the concept of heaven provided an escape from the brutal realities of everyday existence for sharecroppers. She explains that life was so hard for her ancestors that the concept of a pain-free afterlife embedded in the Christian ideology far outweighed the practicalities of the religion that justified their exploitation. However, Walker argues that although providing a much-needed escape from their present reality, Christianity manifested negatively in the way Black people viewed themselves and their environment. Since the Christian religion operated under a dualistic (heaven/hell, good/evil, superior/inferior) system and the dominant view of nature was to fear, control, and dominate the Earth, several Black people adopted a similar view towards the land. Further, under this particular doctrine, other religions and spiritual expressions were viewed with disdain and suspicion. So much so that a loss of the belief in the self and the land occurred. Walker provides an example of this state of mind when she discusses the reaction from the older generation when the trend to embrace and express one's distinctive and unique heritage emerged in the sixties. She states,

They saw us turning back to something that they'd been taught to despise and that, by now, they actively feared. Many of our parents had been taught that the world was only two or three thousand years old, and that spiritually civilized life began with the birth of Jesus Christ. Their only hope of enjoying a better existence, after a lifetime of crushing toil and persistent abuse, was to be as much like the long-haired rabbi from a small Jewish sect in a far- off desert as possible. (Walker, 17)

The embrace of Christianity negatively impacted the treatment of Black women, who were intimately connected to nature. Walker utilizes the example of her mother and her role within the church. Walker describes her growing up in the church and how she

viewed her mother's devotion to the church and to the land as two sides of the same coin. She recounts the tender care her mother applied towards the church and its grounds, and how she built the pulpit from scratch, planted and cultivated the church's gardens, and tended to every cleaning need within the church. She explains that this was the tendency of the "sisters" and "mothers" in the church, and how their service ensured the survival of the congregations. However, due to the doctrine of Christianity, her mother – and the other "sisters" and "mothers" of the congregations - were not allowed to speak of their truth and experience. Walker elaborates on this ideology in stating:

The truth was, we already lived in paradise but were worked too hard by the land-grabbers to enjoy it. This is what my mother, and perhaps the other women, knew, and this was one reason why they were not permitted to speak. They might have demanded that the men of the church notice the Earth. Which always leads to revolution. In fact, everyone has known this for a long time. For the other, more immediate and basic, reason my mother and the other women were not permitted to speak in church was that the Bible forbade it. And it is forbidden in the Bible because, in the Bible, men alone are sanctioned to own property, in this case, Earth itself. And women herself *is* property, along with the asses, the oxen, and the sheep. (Walker, 15)

Here, Walker's environmental ideology regarding alienation is brought into sharp focus as the intersection of race, gender, nature, and religion coincides to reveal an awareness of the troubled relationship between Black people and the environment. Particularly, the internalization of a religious ideology that forbids women to share truth about the wisdom and knowledge they have attained through a deep connection with nature. Walker points out that, under this religious philosophy, men contain all the power, even those that are oppressed, over women and the earth.

Finally, Walker's environmental awareness regarding the legacy of Christianity and its negative impact on Black people in relation to the land could be explored through her examination of its influence at the individual level. She considers herself to be a

pagan - which she describes as "of the land, country dweller, peasant...it also means a person whose primary spiritual relationship is with Nature and the Earth" (Walker, 17) - and believes that was the primary tradition of her family despite their claims to Christianity. In *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*, the poem "Pagan" reflects Walker's allegiance to the term and her belief that her family and ancestors practiced the pagan religion:

at home
In the countryside
I make the decision
to leave your book
- overdue at the library-
face up, "promiscuous"
out in the sun.
Pagan.
I laugh to
see
this was our religion
all along.
Hidden
even from ourselves
taught
early
not to touch
the earth.
Years of white gloves
straight seamed hose.
"Being good girls"
Scripture like chains.
Dogma like flies.
Smiles like lock
and lies.
(*Blue Body*, 420)

Walker describes the conflict that emerges between the self and the environment when a person is deeply connected to nature yet operating in a society that undervalues and exploits earth-centeredness. She discusses that, growing up, she grew in reverence, awe, and partnership to the land. Alongside her parents, she learned to fish, gather plants,

farm, draw water from springs, and various other activities that established a deep knowledge of her environment. However, when she would go to church to hear the messages of their belief system, it put her in conflict with herself and the way she experienced the land she had grown to love.

Walker believes that the alienation she felt within herself and the subsequent alienation she began to feel towards the land was a direct result of learning about the concept of sin and evil within the Christian faith. The fear of anything perceived as evil, i.e. earth-centeredness, placed the promised heaven, which served as their assured escape from the everyday occurrences of oppression, in jeopardy. According to Walker, her family practiced heathenism and paganism; however, it was adamantly feared and outwardly rejected. In explaining this tension Walker states, "And this, I could see, day to day, was true not only for me but of my parents; but there was no way to ritually express the magical intimacy we felt with Creation without being accused of, and ridiculed for, indulging in 'heathenism,' that other word for paganism. And Christianity, we were informed, had fought long and hard to deliver us from *that*" (Walker, 20). Walker rejects the predominant view that nature and its inhabitants are inherently evil in need of salvation in order to become "good". She believes that this philosophy only serves to disrupt the faith one can have in themselves, each other, and the environment.

Environmental Celebration

Alice Walker believes that a renewed love, celebration, and joy of the Earth is a worthy ideological pursuit towards shifting away from a shame-based relationship towards nature to one full of embrace. She argues that this embrace will allow for Black people to join in on their legacy of environmental closeness and provide a basis of

renewal that is necessary for future Black environmental engagement. An emphasis on the celebration and joy of nature reflects Walker's womanist theory and combines with ecofeminist Carol Adams' view on the celebration and sacredness of nature as a substantial basis for a solid environmental theory.

Walker believes one of the main ways of engaging in a celebratory perspective of the environment is by viewing God as nature. She believes that God, nature, and its inhabitants are all one of the same beautiful and intricate universe. By extension, a celebratory and communal relationship with nature fosters an intimate connection with the divine, the self, and others. Walker's fictional work *The Color Purple* illuminates this concept in a conversation between the two characters Shug and Celie. In the novel, the two women discuss religion and their concepts of God. Shug reveals her idea of God emerged by rejecting Christianity, good versus evil, and separateness. Shug states, "... My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all round the house" (Walker, 67).

For Walker, celebrating nature extends further than embracing its beauty and splendor. To embrace and celebrate nature is to reject historic and systematic ideologies of oppression against Black people. According to Walker, the Earth provides divine guidance from which Black people have a personal lineage and legacy to engage in instead of being fearful of. In this way, Walker builds on the ecofeminism detailed by Smith, McFague, and others by introducing race and how engaging in a pro-nature mindset benefits Black people specifically. She argues that to celebrate nature is a step

closer to dismantling the pervasive ideology that White men are Gods and rule the world. Walker believes that this ideology sustains systematic levels of oppression on the communal and personal level. By rejecting any philosophy that does not see the Earth as God, Black people have a chance to celebrate their own heritage, claim a spirituality for themselves, and work towards coming out from under the throngs of oppression. For Walker, to view nature as a joyous and celebratory God is to find personal and communal freedom. Ultimately, celebrating nature is the first step, and most important step, towards self-determination and free will. She states, "That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is such a good choice. Never will Nature require that you cut off some part of your body to please It; never will Mother Earth find anything wrong with your natural way. She made it, and She made it however it is so that you will be more comfortable as part of Her creation, rather than less. Everyone deserves a God who adores our freedom" (Walker, 26).

Environmental Reclamation

The last facet of Alice Walker's environmental theory claims that when Black people have a positive relationship with nature it is, indeed, activism. At the beginning of *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, Walker strongly states, "My activism- cultural, political, spiritual- is rooted in my love of nature and my delight in human beings" (Walker, xxii). She asserts that the love of the environment is the foundational philosophy, which ignites then spurs her activism and is her main suggestion to others who wish to be free from an oppressive society. Walker proposes three main concepts regarding environmental activism: decolonization of the mind, engagement in feminist scholarship, and love.

Decolonizing the mind is an essential aspect to Walker's environmental activist thought. She asserts that many minds are imprisoned by a religious ideology that hates women, loves violence, fosters greed, destroys the Earth, and exploits its inhabitants. Due to this, Walker argues that Black men and women have fallen into the trap of thinking that this type of society is substantial for living and their wellbeing. Additionally, Walker believes that this type of mindset has manipulated people away from a belief in their own judgment, people, and the Earth. Walker argues that the awareness of this exploitative past starts the process of the decolonization of one's spirit in order to become empowered and return value back to the Earth and its people. Walker claims, "What is happening in the world more and more is that people are attempting to decolonize their spirits. A crucial act of empowerment, one that might return reverence to the Earth, thereby saving it, in this fearful-of-Nature, spiritually colonized age" (Walker, 4).

A second extension of Walker's environmental activist thought includes a shift in consciousness that places feminist thought in the forefront of awareness. She believes that Black women have been the biggest victims of Christian religious ideology since their forced arrival on American soil. For her, the culprit are heartless male leaders of the Christian church that enslaved people and robbed them of their culture, land, and legacies. She asserts that Black women were subject to such unspeakable cruelty under these systems and that, unfortunately, similar systems of cruelty against Black women still exist to this day. In this way, Walker believes that women who have embraced their pagan, heathen, earth-centered selves can offer their voices as a tool to speak out against historic and current injustice. Walker states, "If our awareness is beginning to change, it is thanks in large part to feminism and feminist scholarship, and to a resurgent belief in

the sacredness of the feminine, which was deliberately erased, demonized, and disparaged in all major religions” (Walker, 20). Walker extends the call for women to use their voice against oppression to all women, including indigenous peoples. She believes that exploitation extends to other women of color living in this society. In order to engage in a new way of thinking in regard to the environment and its people, the perspectives of women must play an integral part.

Finally, Walker reveals the foundation of her work, her environmental thought, and her activism. She believes that love of each other and love of the world is the only way to change the destructive course of the planet. The poem “Love is Not Concerned” exemplifies Walker’s vision of a love orientated activism. She writes:

love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept
the night you ran away
from home
love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one.
(*Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, 23)

Similarly, Walker's love ethic is described when she states, "Because whatever the consequences, people, standing side by side, have expressed who they really are, and that ultimately they believe in the love of the world and each other to be that - which is the foundation of activism" (Walker, xxiii). Her love ideology is apparent yet again in her fictional work *The Color Purple*. In the conversation between Shug and Celie, Celie confides in Shug that everything in the world wants to be loved. Celie tells Shug that humans do all that they can to receive love from others (sing, dance, make faces, give flowers), and that nature mimics this call for love. Because of her love ethic, Walker

views the Earth as fundamentally good, and she believes that people, especially her people, are "innocent as trees." Love grounds Walker's ideology to a view of mankind that, despite the horrors that people can impose upon each other, make them not her enemies. She attributes love to the reason she views animals and nature as valuable as humans and worthy of respect. For Walker, embracing a love ethic is the only path towards environmental healing, enlightenment, the end of suffering, the pathway towards compassion, and the only way into the future. She concludes her environmental thought by expressing that the key to survival and the future of mankind is linked to love of Mother Earth and her people:

One begins to see the world from one's own point of view; to interact with it out of one's own point of view; to interact with it out of one's own conscience and heart. One's own "pagan" Earth spirit. We begin to flow, again, with and into the Universe. And out of this flowing comes the natural activism of wanting to survive, to be happy, to enjoy one another and Life and to laugh. We Begin to distinguish between the need, singly, to throw rocks at whatever is oppressing us, and the creative joy that arises when we bring our collective stones of resistance against injustice together. We begin to see that we must be loved very much by whatever Creation is, to find ourselves on this wonderful Earth. We begin to recognize our sweet, generously appointed placed in the makeup of the Cosmos. (Walker, 26)

Alice Walker Environmental Theory Critique

I argue that Alice Walker's environmental theory is positioned well within the African-American environmental theoretical tradition as well as the growing ecofeminist scholarship. Her awareness of the strain between Black people and the environment is brought forth through her analysis of religious colonization and provides insight into just one of the many ways racism has created a perplexing dynamic between Black people and the environment. Highly conceptual and ideological, I believe that Walker is best considered an African-American Environmental *Philosophical* theorist among the

scholars in African American Environmental thought. Her positions present themselves as a basis of philosophical and ideological ideals that contribute to a traditional social justice approach to understanding the environment. Her views are expressed as internal musings and deep metaphysical considerations that I believe to be highly important in the growing field of African-American environmental thought. Her philosophical perspectives, being a Black woman, a novelist, a professor, and an essayist cumulate in a diverse and unique perspective the environment. Additionally, her suggestions on activism provide a different way of thinking about approaching injustice. Her activism, especially in regard to the environment, is grounded in a conscious awakening of the heart as the foundation for change.

A critique of Walker's environmental thought includes her accessibility to those who do not consider themselves spiritual. Regardless of a spiritual connection, Black people still suffer the impact of environmental oppression. What does Walker's environmental theory have to offer to those who do not consider themselves connected to the land at all? Walker was raised in the South on a farm in Georgia; her upbringing allowed her to have a close connection with the land to call upon when she left the North and her involvement in the Black Power Movement to return to the South for self-reflection. However, due to the Great Migration and the drastic loss of land by Black farmers throughout the half century (Gilbert, Sharp, Felin, 4) many Black people do not have the same connection to the land as Walker does. How, then, does her theory assist in freeing people of the bondage of injustice through nature if no contact has been made with it in their lifetime? Walker's environmental philosophical theory can be improved by considering those who are not spiritual and do not have a connection with the land, yet

suffer from the same systems of oppression and exploitation. Walker's theory can grow by considering a wider audience - as environmental alienation is an issue for many Black people (contact with the land or not) - and her theories fall short in ensuring that it applies to those with a context that is different from hers.

CHAPTER 3

ALICE WALKER, ENVIRONMENTALISM, AND *MERIDIAN*

Previous Scholarship on *Meridian*

Published in 1976, *Meridian* became the second novel produced by Alice Walker. The novel is set during the 1960s and 1970s and is positioned within the context of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The narrative chronicles the life of Meridian Hill following her childhood in rural Georgia, time as a student at Saxton college, involvement (and disillusionment) with the Civil Rights Movement, complex relationships, and eventual activism within a southern rural community. In *Meridian*, Walker wrestles with nuanced themes such as motherhood, abortion, rape, misogyny, nihilism, religious oppression, interracial relationships, killing for the revolution, racism, exploitation of indigenous people, and environmental alienation. Although heavy and at times cruel, the novel is subsequently a rejuvenating coming-of-age story of a young woman grappling with these incredibly complex issues. Although burdened with the realities of sickness, sexism, racism and rejection, *Meridian* is ultimately a story of hope and redemption, particularly pertaining to the struggle for freedom, self-renewal, social responsibility, and environmental reclamation.

Ultimately, the novel chronicles the spiritual evolution of the main character Meridian Hill and her phases of philosophical understanding regarding her role as a woman, enlightenment, the interconnectedness of all people, the Civil Rights Movement, and the environment. In *Alice Walker A Critical Companion*, scholar Gerri

Bates believes the process of Hill's personal and philosophical cycles become evident within the structure of the chapters. Bates states,

Walker takes readers on a circular journey and evolves full circle. The journey is also embryonic, a return to a time before conception when decisions regarding life's paths are made. The spirit that is to become agrees to follow certain paths that are made. The spirit that is to become agrees to follow certain paths before entry into a specific realm is allowed. This journey is personal. Then the spirit that is to become agrees to interact with other spirits and share discoveries and experiences. The spirits are in a constant state of travel spiraling, intersecting, and interacting toward a higher understanding. This journey is social. Both journeys are explorations of history, and at a given point personal history and public history intersect to bring revelation and resolution. (Bates, 75)

Bates' comment on the structure of *Meridian* demonstrates the nonlinear and cyclical process of Hill's journey, and points towards Walker's belief that the self-discovery and enlightenment process follow in the same vein. In *The World Has Changed*, Walker speaks about the writing process as nonuniform and as a reflection of the journey itself by stating, "Since *Meridian* was written in a different way- not chronological- I revised the sections a great deal... somehow part of it really understands the questions, not just understands the answers. Sometimes when you start, you just have the vaguest notion of where you're going, and you don't even know what things are important to work with" (*Conversations*, 231).

Several scholars recognize *Meridian* as a significant social, cultural, political, spiritual, and historical novel. Intellectuals such as Elliott Butler-Evans in "History and Genealogy in Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*," Leslie E. Wingard in "As Seen Through Stain Glass: Religion Politics and Aesthetics in Alice Walker's *Meridian*," Karen F. Stein in "Alice Walker's Critique of the Revolution," and Gerri Bate's *Alice Walker: A Critical Companion* recognize the novel's literary significance in relation to the Civil Rights Movement, presentation of Black feminist

thought, and spiritual evolution. A key focus among scholars includes the belief that *Meridian* primarily functions as a critique of the Civil Rights Movement, especially as it pertains to the movement's treatment of Black women and the subsequent fight for Black women's celebration, respect, dignity, political relevance, and inclusion. Scholar Elliot Butler-Evans states, "Among the issues the narratives explore are the celebration of the female as other within the context of a new mythology, the deconstruction of traditional social and moral values, particularly those governing women's sexuality and motherhood; and these problems that are central to Black-white feminism. The reader must see each of these themes as a manifestation of an implicit feminist consciousness... these episodes are digressions from the larger struggles of the Civil Rights Movement and deliberately place the personal histories of women in the foreground" (Butler-Evans, 119).

Similarly, scholars succeed in capturing the predominant themes represented within *Meridian*. While Butler-Evans emphasizes *Meridian's* feminist ideology, other scholars such as Gerri Bates and Karen Stein examine how the feminist stance within her work serves as a critique of the Civil Rights Movement and recognize that, at the time of publication, the novel received wide-ranging criticism due to her portrayal of Black men in the movement. Butler-Evans states,

Meridian is an important cultural novel. It sheds light on the African American male leadership in the movement and the ideology of Black nationalism. Because the leadership manifested as a masculine agenda, little knowledge of the women's work surfaced. The assumptions and beliefs of that period relegated women to second class and second place... Walker frames the behind-the-scenes strife among men, their bad behavioral choices and abuse of women, both black and white. There was a culture of power that in some ways mimicked the white male power structure. (Bates, 87)

Similarly, Stein argues that missions of the character Meridian (that of non-violence, equality of both men and women, and forming a unique revolutionary ideal of her own) were all issues ignored by the mainstream agenda of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement.

In general, scholarly analysis of Walker's *Meridian* recognizes the merging of personal transformation and social/political change within her work, her feminist ideology, spiritual developments, and critiques of the Civil Rights Movement. However, scholars have yet to specifically examine how Walker's environmental theory presents itself throughout the novel. Critics of *Meridian* have not explored how the novel represents Walker's environmental ethic, and how her work includes incorporates an awareness of Black people and their relationship to the environment.

In addition to her rural upbringing, I would argue the work of Zora Neal Hurston and Jean Toomer highly influenced the environmental leanings in Walker's fictional work. By the time she encountered Hurston's work, Walker believed that only men wrote fiction and she had never been exposed to a writer who she felt truly reflected her culture. Further, Hurston's work was deeply rooted in the connection and love of nature which reflected the ideologies of Walker. In her interview "I Know What the Earth Says" in *Conversations*, Walker describes how Hurston captivated her imagination, reflected her experiences, and influenced her work. She states,

Then I read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and it was so much my culture. I had never read a book that was so true to my specific southern black culture, full of music, full of humor, full of just—not righteousness—craziness. People living their lives, people having good times, people fussing and fighting. At the same time, as with my mother and father, they are absolutely rooted in the earth, in earth life. People in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are really pagan. They are not bamboozled by religion as it is taught in the South. They are always poking fun at the hypocrisy. And the passages that are so incredible are, of course, when they

drop a bean in the soil, and up comes this food. The Indians, too, the way they knew a storm was coming. They started leaving. The animals knew, they started moving. Other people were hesitating because they were not as connected. They had already gotten two or three steps removed from what is the natural rhythm of the earth, so they didn't know and so they had to sit there, be scared, and pray to the sky god, watching the sky god. Now this is an aspect that I rarely see reflected in any review [of my work]. Basically, it carries forward my sense of the transformation that many people have to go through to shed what is a deadening sky-god religion, whatever it is, in order to come back to their rootedness in nature as the source of divinity. (Walker, 5)

Environmentalism in *Meridian*

I argue, *Meridian*, among other things, illuminates the environmental thoughts of Alice Walker through four narratives throughout the novel: the "Gold" chapter, Meridian's transformation at Sacred Serpent, the story of The Sojourner, and Meridian's process of self-healing. The chapter titled "Gold" appears five chapters into the novel. It consists of two full paragraphs and operates as a short story autonomously positioned within the context of the larger narrative in *Meridian*. The story describes Meridian when she was seven years old having found a large piece of dirty metal. The item is heavily coated in the dirt but she decides to clean it off in order to see the piece of metal more clearly. After she cleans off what she thought to be cheap metal, much to her surprise, she discovers that it was in fact gold. She drags the heavy piece of gold back to her family to share her discovery. She wants her family to match the enthusiasm she felt having found this piece of gold, but her excitement is not returned. Having been dismissed from her family, she decides to bury the piece of gold underneath a magnolia tree. She returns once a week to dig up the gold and look at it. However, as time passes, she returns to the tree less frequently and eventually forgets all about the piece of gold.

Originally, I analyzed the short story to be a symbol of Meridian's self-discovery. I still ascribe to the belief that the short story deals with elements of having discovered a part of herself that was rejected and forgotten. However, upon gaining a deeper understanding of Walker's environmental theory, I believe there is more at play in this short story. I believe Walker uses this story as an allegory of the relationship between Black people and the environment. "Gold" represents the tension between the sense of discovery and connection to nature being met with dismissal, disinterest, and disillusionment. First, Meridian is young, by herself, exploring the woods. Her having found a piece of metal indicates that she was spending time alone discovering the nuances of the woods.

Having discovered that the item she found was gold, Meridian "to her amazement" rushes back in to show the item to her family. Meridian's excitement reveals the positive nature-affirming attitude she has in relation to the land. She views nature as a place filled with wonder and awe. Her environment provides a context for learning and unearthing new treasures. Her age, which the narrative specifically states she is seven years old, highlights the innocence and lack of awareness towards any type of strain or tension held towards the land, which the reader is soon to find out exists. Her eagerness to show her family what she found reveals her desire to share what she has discovered in the playground of her natural environment.

However, instead of intrigue and interest, Meridian is met with dismissal and rejection regarding the gold. "I've found some gold! She shouted. "Gold!" And she placed the large heavy gold bar in her mother's lap. "Move that thing," her mother said sharply. "Don't you see I'm trying to get these peas ready for supper?" (*Meridian*, 43). Similarly,

her father and brothers were not interested in what Meridian had found. The response of her family juxtaposed with the enthusiasm of the young Meridian reveals the tension that exists between Black people and the environment and the dismissal of the person who notices the environment. Pulling from her earthlings' ideology, Walker believes that all are from the earth and, when exposed, can find profound joy, love, wisdom, and peace in the environment. For her, this occurs at an early age. However, this relationship to the environment does not last long or, rather, is disrupted as Black people are confronted with a legacy of their historically complicated relationship to their environment. For Meridian, this is not explicitly told to her, yet reveals itself through the dismissal and rejection from her family, for through their rejections, it is indirectly communicated that what is to be found in nature is of no use, even if what is discovered is as profitable as gold, and that her values are worthless.

I interpret Meridian's family's dismissal of her discovery in two ways. The first indicates how extensive labor limits the amount of time to examine and explore the land. This interpretation incorporates Walker's theory that Black sharecroppers and workers of the land were so overburdened by the toil of their work to be unable to spare any moment to consider what could be found in nature. This is expressed through the mother's reaction when Meridian brings her the gold. Her mother's response dismisses Meridian's finding because she is too busy working to ensure that supper is ready for the night. Meridian's discovery cannot interrupt the work her mother is doing, and her mother surely does not feel she has time to stop and examine what Meridian has found. Meridian's mother (named Gertrude Hill) is so consumed with her work, she is unable to

recognize that Meridian brought gold to her. Even after Meridian told her the worth of the gold and that it was profitable, her mother still sent her away.

The second interpretation suggests that Gertrude has internalized the belief that little value can be found in the Earth. This interpretation incorporates Walker's theory that the Christian religion promotes a view that the Earth is inferior, not valuable, and devoid of good. Gertrude represents the embodiment of those Christian ideals as she is strongly committed to the local church and subscribes to the beliefs that Walker states are detrimental to Black people in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*. Meridian's mother only views the church as holy and as the sole place to experience god. In "The Attainment of Good" chapter Walker writes,

She did not complain against the church because she believed the church building- the mortar and bricks- to be holy; she believed that this holiness had rubbed off from years of scripture reading and impassioned prayers, so that now holiness covered the walls like paint. She thought the church was literally God's house, and believed she felt his presence there when she entered the door; when she stepped back outside there was a different feeling, she believed. (*Meridian*, 71)

As already introduced in Walker's environmental theory, the religious beliefs hailed in the churches are not only detrimental to the well-being of Black people but also damage their relationship to the environment. Gertrude's reaction demonstrates the internalization of those beliefs. Gertrude believes that God can only be found inside of the church building and that what exists outside of those confines lacks in holiness. This ideology, of course, extends to the environment and is brought to light in the Gertrude's disregard for Meridian. In the novel, Gertrude represents the embodiment of the negative internalized beliefs acquired through adherence to the ideologies of the Christian church. Her mother has so lost her wonder for nature that she is unable to see that world of wealth available to her literally right in her lap.

The specification that Meridian put the shiny piece of gold "in her mother's lap" and that Gertrude was still unable to see its value demonstrates the costliness of disregarding what can be found in nature, because both Meridian and her family will literally lose out on the opportunity for financial gain by discovering a large amount of gold, and because it reaffirms that what is found in nature is of no worth or value.

The reaction from her family is not without consequence. Walker demonstrates that, unless interrupted, the process of dismissal and alienation of what can be found in nature (both literally and figuratively) can be passed down through the generations. In response to her family's reaction, Meridian's relationship to nature is placed in jeopardy. She buries the gold under a magnolia tree (a recurring trope throughout the novel), and her once strong connection to the environment begins to dwindle. The final sentences of the chapter read, "She put it in a shoe box and buried it under the magnolia tree that grew in the yard. About once a week she dug it up to look at it. Then she dug it up less and less ... until finally she forgot to dig it up. Her mind turned to other things" (*Meridian*, 43). Walker's "Gold" reveals to the reader that the complex relationship between Black people and the environment still exists, as well as warns of the consequences for maintaining an environmentally alienated ideology. It is also important to note that "Gold" appears early in the book, setting the tone for the environmental ideologies Meridian will encounter throughout her journey.

Following "Gold", Walker presents the chapter detailing Meridian's spiritual transformation through nature. "Indians and Ecstasy" does not occur in chronological order, but in order of importance to the narrative. The chapter juxtaposes the experience of a seven-year old Meridian and her mother with the story of a slightly older Meridian

and her father. The chapter follows Meridian's exposure to her father's interest in ancient settlements of Indians in North America. Without her knowledge, Meridian's father had built a small shed dedicated to the research of ancient Native American civilizations. The shed is filled with old maps, books, and photographs he collected over the years. When Meridian discovers her father in the shed, she finds him in tears due to the content of the documents he is reviewing. She also discovers a frightening image of a dead Native American child. Her father's tears and the photograph scare Meridian, and she runs away in terror.

Later Meridian overhears a conversation between her father and Gertrude. Evidently, her father had discovered that the sixty acres of land acquired by his grandfather after the Civil War had once belonged to and was stolen from the Cherokee people. According to Meridian's father, he could no longer claim the land as his own and wants to pass the deed to Mr. Longknife, a Native American he believes has a familial connection to the land. Mr. Longknife stays on the land for a few weeks contemplating taking over the land when, finally, he decides to give the deed back to Meridian's father. Shortly after, Meridian's family's ownership of the land is stripped away by the government. The government wants to turn Meridian's father's land into a public park due to a developed interest in the place called Sacred Serpent. Even after disputes with the county courthouse regarding his possession of the land for generations and the deed that placed the ownership of his land in his name, the government overrules his ownership and bans him and the Hill family from the land because the public park will not be open to Black people.

The chapter transitions to describe a process of spiritual transformation Meridian experiences at the Sacred Serpent. Meridian recalls the passed down story of her father's grandmother, Feather Mae, who long ago became transformed by the spiritual energy held within the Sacred Serpent. The Sacred Serpent was known to be a burial ground for Native Americans once living on the land. Feather Mae had fought with her husband against the flattening and gardening of the land, for she viewed it as a disrespectful action against the people buried there. The Sacred Serpent sat at the back of the land and contained within its center a pit that was forty feet deep with green moss surrounding all the sides. One day, Feather Mae decided to follow the activity of a few small animals towards the pit of the Sacred Serpent and found herself within its center. She underwent a process of "spiritual intoxication" and emerged transformed, rejecting all religion. Meridian recalls, "Later, Feather Mae renounced all religion that was not based on the experience of physical ecstasy - thereby shocking her Baptist church and its unsympathetic congregation - and near the end of her life she loved walking nude about her yard and worshipped only the sun" (*Meridian*, 50).

The same pit that transformed Feather Mae did the same Meridian and her father. Meridian watches her father visit the pit repeatedly and return with his "whole frame radiating brightness like the space around a flame" (*Meridian*, 50). Meridian believes that her father's exposure to the spiritual energies enveloped in the Sacred Serpent is the reason he becomes so compassionate towards the Native Americans that occupied the land before it was stolen from them. Meridian found her way to the Sacred Serpent because she was interested in the ecstasy her great-grandmother derived from being in

that space and the state of rejuvenation she finds her father in after his many returns from there.

The first time Meridian entered Sacred Serpent's pit, she is very frightened. After almost succumbing to fear and almost abandoning the pit altogether, she remembers the experiences of Feather Mae and her father, and all her fear disappears. Once the fear leaves her, she begins to experience intense bodily sensations. She states, "It was as if the walls of the earth that enclosed her rushed outward, leveling themselves at a dizzying rate, and then spinning wildly, lifting her out of her body and giving her the feeling of flying" (*Meridian*, 50). During the process of this bodily transcendence, Meridian becomes flooded with images of her family, trees, birds, houses, and flowers all circling around her in swirling motion around her head before they descend in a rush to the spot where she is standing. When she comes to, as she believes she left her body, she finds herself staring directly into the sun.

"Indians and Ecstasy" ends with a description of her return to Sacred Serpent when Black people were finally given access to visit. The chapter solemnly concludes, "She returned one afternoon and tried in vain to relive her earlier ecstasy and exaltation. But there were people shouting and laughing as they slid down the sides of the great Serpent's coil. Others stood glumly by, attempting to study the meaning of what had already and forever been lost" (*Meridian*, 52).

I argue that the chapter "Indians and Ecstasy" reflects key components of Walker's environmental theory. Walker's environmental celebration theory emerges in the process of transformations that occurred among Feather Mae, Meridian's father, and herself. Walker exposure to the natural environment serves as a catalyst for personal

renewal. By becoming transformed at Sacred Serpent, an abundance of spiritual transformations occurred (or deepened) such as renouncement of an oppressive religion, increased compassion, recognition of the earth as a sacred space, and an understanding of the interconnectedness of the world and its people.

The interconnectedness of the world and its long lineage of people became the basis of spiritual understanding for Meridian, and embodies the celebration ideals presented within Walker's environmental theory. Additionally, the experiences of the Hill family revolve on the idea of connecting to the past through nature. The interconnectedness of the world included their link to their family lineage as they lived and worked on the land, as well as their connection to the Native Americans living there before them. Walker shows that land connects us all, even if that connection is complicated. I would argue that when Black people connect with the land, they are not only connecting to the spirit inside of themselves, but are also joining in on a generational legacy that has the power to connect them to the vastness of the Earth. This connection is ancient, sacred, and necessary towards understanding the meaning of life and honoring those who came and lived before. Further, this connection fosters what is necessary for a fruitful life on earth, which according to Walker is love, joy, ecstasy, compassion, and peace in one's self, others, and the environment. Meridian describes the process of understanding the interconnectedness and sacredness of all things:

And in this movement she saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush toward a central point high above her and she was drawn with them, as whirling, as bright, as free, as they. Then the outward flow, the rush of images, returned to the center of the pit where she stood, and what had left her at its going was returned...Her father said the Indians had constructed the coil in the Serpent's tail in order to give the living a sensation similar to that of the dying: The body seemed to drop away, and only the spirit lived, set free in the world. But she was

not convinced. It seemed to her that it was a way the living sought to expand the consciousness of being alive, there where the ground about them was filled with the dead. (*Meridian*, 50-51)

I would argue that this chapter successfully presents Walker's view that sacred encounters with the natural environment are essential to the spiritual wellbeing of a person. It also incorporates her assertion that racism is harmful to the relationship between people and the environment. In this chapter, Walker demonstrates how racism functions as a continuous disruption to the access of spiritual gifts embedded in the land and divorces both Indigenous and Black people from themselves, their ancestral legacy, and ownership of the land. This is represented in a variety of ways throughout the chapter, the first being Meridian's father's recognition of owning stolen land, and the process of coming to terms with profiting off land that was taken from Indigenous peoples. Even when Meridian's father tries to reconcile this painful reality by giving the deed to Mr. Longknife, the pain is still so unbearable to him he is unable to acquire ownership of his ancestral land. However, even if the plans of his father were to succeed in giving Mr. Longknife the land, racism is so embedded in American soil that Meridian's father's reconciliation would have been short-lived. The government's decision to take over the land during a time of segregation and refusal to recognize the ownership of Meridian's father continued the cycle of regimented environmental alienation imposed on people of color. Due to racism, Meridian's family lost their land, livelihood, and ancestral connection.

Walker calls attention to how this forced alienation not only has impact on the personal and relational level, but impacts the Black community as a whole. The ending of the chapter serves to illuminate the lost connection and misunderstandings that Black people have towards the land. Walker suggests that is no fault of Black people that this

tense, complicated, alienated, and frustrated relationship exists. It is a direct result of racism and oppression. Not only did the government's decision ban them from the land, the alterations to the soil for the public park construction destroyed Sacred Serpent's powerful energies. The Black people that visit now are unable to have a connection to that which transformed Meridian, her father, Feather Mae, and the countless other Black and Indigenous Native American people. The same place that was instrumental to joy, compassion, love, freedom, the very things that are needed in a world full of oppression, annihilation, racism, are destroyed, and that link to history and legacy lost.

I suggest that Walker believes this repeated environmental racism and oppression further alienates Black people from themselves and from nature. Racism causes a deeply rooted misunderstanding within Black people regarding their place in the environment. This misunderstanding is demonstrated when Meridian's brothers are happy that they will no longer live on the farm (as they view farm life as dirty and unprogressive) and in the subsequent chapters slowly revealing the story of the Sojourner Tree and its attack by the students in protest at the university Meridian attends called Saxon College.

The story of the Sojourner Tree unfolds throughout the novel. The Sojourner is first introduced in the chapter titled "Sojourner" near the beginning of *Meridian*. The Sojourner is the largest magnolia tree in the country located in the center of Saxon College. Saxon College was a former plantation, and the tree was planted by a slave named Louvinie. Louvinie was a phenomenal storyteller and known for her inability to smile. She came from a long lineage of West African storytellers and continued that legacy while enslaved on the Saxon plantation. Her stories were frightening, scary, and

not for the faint of heart; tragically, no one informed Louvinie that the youngest of the Saxon children had an irregularly fragile heart. One day as Louvinie was telling her stories to the Saxon children, the youngest became so frightened his heart gave out, and he suffered a heart attack and died at the age of seven.

As a consequence of action that was not her fault, Louvinie's tongue was clipped out of her mouth and (after begging for it through coughs of blood) was kicked over to her in the sand. She begged for possession of her tongue, for to die without it in her mouth or in a place of her choosing, would result in her soul being lost and condemned to snort through the entirety of the afterlife like a pig. She acquired her tongue, smoked it in her cabin, and buried it under the, then, underdeveloped magnolia tree. Meridian recalls, "Even before her death forty years later the tree had outgrown all the others around it. Other slaves believed it possessed magic. They claimed the tree could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power to obscure vision. Once in its branches, a hiding slave could not be seen" (*Meridian*, 34). The tree was also credited with protecting the women of Saxon campus, providing a hub for social activity, to make love, and a source of spiritual renewal for its visitors. Meridian had a special relationship to the Sojourner. Meridian explains,

This tree filled her with the same sense of minuteness and hugeness, of past and present, of sorrow and ecstasy that she had known at the Sacred Serpent. It gave her a profound sense of peace (which was only possible when she could feel invisible) to know slaves had found shelter in its branches. When her spirits were low, as they were often enough that first year, she would sit underneath The Sojourner and draw comfort from her age, her endurance, the stories the years told of her, and her enormous size. When she sat beneath the Sojourner, she knew she was not alone. (*Meridian*, 89)

During Meridian's second year at Saxon College, talk of cutting down the tree circulated throughout the campus. The owners wanted to install a new building that

would destroy a large amount of natural vegetation on the campus, the Sojourner Tree included. The decision was met with a campus wide protest in defense of The Sojourner. Nicknamed the Music Tree, The Sojourner was able to live on, if only for a while.

In the chapter "Sojourner," Meridian experiences the tragedy of misdirected blame and violence towards nature and, consequently, the vicious attack and destruction of The Sojourner. Walker uses the destruction of The Sojourner as an example of the misunderstandings and confusion that arise out oppression, and the forced environmental alienation that emerges from perpetual attacks. The students were protesting a racist and unjust incident that occurred on the campus. A member of the community named Wild Child was struck by a car and killed close to campus. Although raised homeless and unable to function within society, Wild Child was close to the students of the campus. Having no family, friends, or community, the students of Saxon wanted to hold a funeral for Wild Child in the chapel at Saxon. The death of Wild Child occurred amid racial protest throughout the city and on the campus that many of the students were heavily involved in. By the time of the funeral, the students were tired and fed up. The president of the university sent security to block the students from holding a ceremony for Wild Child in the chapel, which was ironic due to the school's adamant indoctrination of Christian values and church attendance. The president, however, did not view Wild Child as worthy to even enter into the doors of the chapel, even upon death. The students, having run out of options and out of patience, brought Wild Child to The Sojourner for the ceremony. That night, after they buried Wild Child in an ungroomed spot in the local black cemetery, the students returned to unleash their anger onto The Sojourner because of injustice and accumulated frustration.

Arguably, Walker uses the destruction of The Sojourner as an illustration of the restrictions of the Christian faith, the generational frustration acquired towards racism and injustice, and the consequential unleashing of that rage towards the environment. The rage accrued through exposure to racism had to be expressed. I argue Walker believes that the environment is usually the victim of the inevitable misunderstandings and anger produced from repeated exposure to oppression. The school, having built its entire mission on the values of the Christian religion, repeatedly rejected and undermined the visions of the students fighting for equality during segregation. This highlights once again that, according to Walker, the Christian faith is antithetical to people of color. Additionally, the legacy of a complicated relationship with nature resulted in its destruction as opposed to its protection in the moments of crisis. I assert Walker uses The Sojourner attacks as a symbol of what happens when continued alienation towards the land occurs because of injustice and repeated oppression. Furthermore, the incident with The Sojourner illuminates the misdirection of anger back towards that which deserves protection. Meridian remembers the night of the destruction by stating, "Students, including Anne-Marion, rioted on Saxon campus for the first time in its long, placid, impeccable history, and the only thing they managed to destroy was The Sojourner. Though Meridian begged them to dismantle the president's house instead, in a fury of confusion and frustration they worked all night, and chopped and sawed down, level to the ground, that mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree" (*Meridian*, 38).

Walker may have also used the story of The Sojourner to demonstrate the consequences of a sustained strained relationship with the earth. The Sojourner was not only part of a long legacy of slaves and a link to an ancestral connection, but it also

served as protection, guidance, and source of joy for escaping slaves and the Black people attending the university. Yet, it was the first and only target for destruction. This misguided and misdirected anger only serves to harm the Black community, and Walker uses this story to illuminate that concept. The destruction did nothing to dismantle the power of racism and oppression on the campus; rather, it destroyed a valued and sacred connection vital to the legacy of the slaves that came before the current students and the essential connectivity to nature.

Fortunately, *Meridian* does not end as somberly as the entirety of the novel would suggest. Walker provides elements of environmental healing and restoration throughout the novel. The cyclical structure of the novel functions as a process of environmental renewal for both Meridian and Walker's ultimate claims in her environmental thought. The entire novel can be interpreted as a book of environmental healing through the spiritual regeneration of the self and the hope that the relationship between Black people and nature can be mended overtime. Meridian's infamous line as the reader is first introduced to her suggests that the story will be a process of healing by exposing the ills that Meridian, and by extension the environment, has experienced. After finishing a life-threatening public display of activism at the beginning of the novel, Meridian is carried back to her home as one of the main characters, Truman, comes to visit her. Seeing her in such poor health, he asks her:

"Did they hurt you out there?" He asked.

"They didn't touch me, " she said.

"You're just sick then? "

"Of course I'm sick," snapped Meridian. "Why else would I spend all of this time trying to get well!" (*Meridian*, 11)

The entire novel centers on Walker's theoretical process of becoming personally, spiritually, and environmentally well. For Walker, not only do these elements of healing

intersect with each other, but they also require the confrontation of all that is painful and blocks said healing. For Meridian, healing does not occur instantly, but is a long drawn out, painful, excruciating process that often bewilders those around her and, at times, herself. However, Walker uses Meridian as an example to show that the process is worth it to mend the intricate and delicate relationship Black people have with the environment.

I argue that for Walker, all of this requires an examination, and subsequent rejection, of the long-held belief that salvation and healing exist outside of the Earth and outside of oneself. This idea is highlighted when the Earth heals Meridian after a long period of sickness at Saxon College. In the chapter "The Recurring Dream," Meridian loses her eyesight for two days and is placed, yet again, on bed rest. Her roommate, indifferent at the time to her survival, passively watches Meridian as she lays in her bed for days. During her eye blindness and sickness, Meridian describes being healed by the universe and becoming connected to all things within the earth. Although she has not eaten for days, she describes feeling full and experiencing ecstasy during her paralysis. One night during this spiritual renewal that Meridian was undergoing, Anne- Marion (Meridian's roommate) witnesses the transformation that changes what she believes and challenges her previous engagements with the earth and spirit.

But one day, as she sat on her own bed across from Meridian's, reading a book of Marxist ideology that included *The Communist Manifesto*, which she considered a really thought-provoking piece of work, she glanced at Meridian's head in shock. For all around it was a full soft light, as if her head, the spikes of her natural, had learned to glow. The sight pricked an unconscious place in Anne-Marion's post-Baptist memory. "Ah shit!" She said, stamping her foot, annoyed that she'd thought of Meridian in a religious context.... We've been raised wrong!" She said, "that's what's wrong." What she meant was she no longer believed in God and did not like to think about Jesus (for whom she felt a bitter, grudging admiration) ... (*Meridian*, 118)

Additionally, the process of healing requires active participation in confronting that which is painful and hard, which I'd like to call the spiritual activism of Alice Walker. I believe Walker asserts, through the journey of Meridian, that though the process and journey are difficult and the confrontation with racism, environmental alienation, and oppression is life-threatening work, it must be done to imagine a new future. This is told in cyclical fashion, as towards the end of the novel a friend sends a picture of a small root growing in the place where The Sojourner Tree was destroyed many years prior. The regrowth of the magnolia tree is reminiscent of the gold Meridian planted in the magnolia tree as a child. The novel ends suggesting that, like the gold and the regrowth of the Sojourner, there is a hopeful future towards environmental healing. In the last chapter "Release," Truman's farewell to Meridian reminds the reader of The Sojourner. After a prolonged process of sickness, illness, terror, pain accompanied with joy, peace, ecstasy, and love, Meridian emerges reborn. In describing her, Truman states, "The new part had grown out of the old, though, and that was reassuring. This part of her, new, sure and ready, even eager, for the world, he knew he must meet again and recognize for its true value at some future time" (*Meridian*, 227).

CONCLUSION

Our thoughts must be on how to restore to the Earth its dignity as a living being; how to stop raping and plundering it as a matter of course. We must begin to develop the consciousness that everything has equal rights because existence itself is equal. In other words, we are all here: trees, people, snakes, alike. We must realize that even tiny insects in the South American jungle know how to make plastic, for instance, they have simply chosen not to cover the Earth with it. (*Living by the Word*, 87)

In all, African-American Environmental theorists explore the relationship between Black people and the environment. The emergence of African-American Environmental thought responds to the ongoing erasure of Black experiences and perspectives in nature. Mainstream environmentalism maintains a legacy of perceived innocence and incorruptibility towards the land, while Black Environmentalism demonstrates the limitations of that ideology. Limitations include the erasure of history in regards to stealing land from Indigenous people, the brutality of slavery, legalized lynching, forced removal from the land, exploitation in sharecropping, destruction of sacred lands, heavy pollution in urban centers, and harmful environmental policies. For Black and Indigenous peoples, it is impossible to view American soil as innocent.

This project surveyed the scholarship of prominent intellectuals within the growing field of African-American Environmental Thought. Scholars of the field such as Kimberly Smith, Camille Dungy, Carolyn Finney, Katherine McKittrick, and Clyde Woods provided insight on the key concepts and ideas within the discipline. Predominant

considerations in their work included histories of environmental alienation, erasure of Black experience with nature, examples of Black environmental activism, spiritual calls to action, and the utilization of narratives and art as a means to bridge the gap between Black people and the environment.

Furthermore, I surveyed the scholarship on environmentalism and feminism to illustrate a more nuanced perspective on how environmental alienation specifically impacts women. Ecofeminist scholars Pamela Smith, Carolyn Merchant, Carol Adams, Sallie McFague, and Rosemary Radford Ruether present the dangers of dualism, warnings against religions that promote the domination of the environment, sacredness of the Earth, spiritual connection to nature, and the consequences that emerge from viewing nature as inferior. Scholars such as Carol Adams introduce terminology such as ecowomanism to highlight the specific impact environmental degradation has on women of color.

The centrality on Alice Walker and her work emerged through a realization that the majority of the scholars listed did not include Walker's non-fiction or fictional work as a contribution to the growing scholarship on African-American Environmental Thought and the budding Ecofeminist movement. Most importantly, the scholars didn't include her work as a legitimate voice towards imagining a new environmental future and healing towards environmental alienation. Few scholars, such as Camille Dungy, Katherine McKittrick, and Pamela Smith, acknowledge her work in their scholarship. However, their consideration does not promote Walker to the environmentalist status she deserves. Additionally, as many of the scholars included examples of literature to

reiterate their ideologies, *Meridian* is not referenced as prominent Black environmental literature, if at all.

My project sought to address the environmental thoughts of Alice Walker and demonstrate how her theories become evident with her fictional work *Meridian*. This serves multiple purposes. The first includes the importance of Walker's contribution to mainstream environmentalism. As it is clear that mainstream environmentalism ignores the perspectives of Black people, Walker's theory joins the voices of people of color that are actively presenting counter-narratives and fighting for inclusion of their perspectives. Further, Walker's work serves as a contribution to the growing tradition of African-American Environmental thought as her voice is left out of the predominant discussion on Black people and the environment. The project also serves to clearly define Alice Walker's environmental theory in the hopes of demonstrating how her thoughts address the issues prominent in Black environmental thought and offer unique perspectives towards the path of healing and reconciliation. Fundamentally, the mission of the project is to argue that Walker is a Black environmentalist and should be considered as such. Finally, the project places significance on Walker's *Meridian* as a considerable and important example of African-American environmental literature.

Through this process, I utilized the theories outlined by the African-American environmental scholars and ecofeminist academics. Through the use of their theories, as well as some of the theories outlined in her other non-fiction work, I classified Walker's environmental theory in three main ways: Consideration, Celebration, and Reclamation. Alice Walker's environmental consideration includes her awareness of the complex relationship with Black people and the environment. She argues that the

Christian religion is the main cause for environmental alienation. For Walker, alienation from self, community, and the environment is a direct result of those in power adhering to a religion that promotes the fear of nature. She extends her argument to express that this belief not only holds a fear of nature, but also a fear of Black women. Walker argues that a belief in the Christian religion has kept Black people in bondage and has driven them away from a belief in themselves and their natural environment. Walker's environmental celebration theory embraces the sacredness, spiritual, healing, and renewing elements involved with relating to nature. She defines herself as a pagan and a heathen and believes that reverence of the Earth and its occupants is key to living a fulfilled life and a catalyst for mending the alienated aspects of Black people and the environment. Finally, Walker's environmental reclamation serves as her call to action towards imaging a healed ecological future. Walker strongly believes that love of each other and love of the world is the only way to change the destructive course of the planet.

Conclusively, *Meridian* evokes Walker's environmental theories in a numerous of ways. Through four main narrative cycles, Walker's environmental consideration, celebration, and reclamation are demonstrated. The main character, Meridian Hill, operates as Walker's agent and embodiment of her environmental theories. Through Meridian's journey, the reader is exposed to the historical legacy of racism and the natural environment, ancestral connection through nature, the spiritual and personal renewal as a result of nature, misdirected blame and violence towards nature, and healing through nature. Meridian's coming of age journey serves as an example of the journey for all towards personal, communal, and environmental restoration.

For both Alice Walker's theory and *Meridian*, my main critique is the accessibility of her suggested path towards people of color's relationship with nature. Her theory relies heavily on the exposure of nature in youth and the continuous exposure to nature overtime. Both Walker and Meridian are attuned to nature from an early age and have years of experience exploring their natural environment. This background heavily influences her theories and suggestions regarding environmental healing. However, little is said about those who do not have that same upbringing. Her theory does not incorporate how it can extend to those who have not experienced nature the way she has or may not have access to the type of land familiarities Walker possesses. How will her theory reach groups of people who do not have access to natural land? How will her theory reach groups of people in urban centers, devoid of interactions with nature? Further, what offerings does Walker bring to those with a lack of mobility and access to natural spaces?

Further studies on this project would include Alice Walker's considerations on animal rights and well-being. I believe an analysis of the relationship between Black people, animals, and the environment prove relevant as she addresses similar concerns regarding exploitation, violence, unfair treatment, and value placements on occupants of the earth. Also, an expansion of Alice Walker's animal rights theory could impact communities of color that do not have access to the natural environment. As Walker promotes vegetarianism as an ethical and love based approach to life. Moreover, she believes that eating animals is a direct link to the entrapment and exploitation of Black people in this country. In her book *Why War is Never a Good Idea* she states, "If I'm eating food I know was a creature in a cage, it brings up memories of segregation and

the stories from my ancestors, of being in captivity and denied their personalities, their true beings. Animals were not made for us, or our use. They have their own use, which is just being who they are” (*Why War is Never a Good Idea*, 35).

Additional studies of this project would include how her environmental theories were influenced by her travels abroad. Alice Walker has visited countless countries throughout the world and reflects on environmentalism on a global scale in her works *Why War is Never a Good Idea*, *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, and *The World Will Follow Joy*. These collections of essays and poems reflect her growing earth consciousness as she encounters different cultures and peoples around the world. An extension of this project would analyze her international environmental ideology and seek to understand how it affirms, challenges, critiques, and/or expands her environmental theories. Finally, another suggestion for further study includes the impact of Walker’s environmental theory on environmental justice, law making, and policy. A broader scope of study asks if Walker’s environmental theory impacts or influences approaches to activism within the environmental justice movement

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CURRICULUM VITA

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Education

University of Louisville | Louisville, KY MA in Pan-African Studies G.P.A.: 3.9

University of Louisville | Louisville, KY BA in History with a Track in Social Sciences Minor in Film and Digital Media Studies G.P.A: 3.764 – Magna Cum Laude

University of New Haven/CEA Study Abroad | Seville, Spain

Relevant Coursework:

Art & Feminism, African-American Environmental Literature, Social Justice and the Environment, Documentary Film & Collective Memory, Theories and Issues in Pan African Studies, Methods in Pan-African Research, Pedagogy of Black Studies, Intro to Pan African Studies Literature, Intro the Pan African Studies, Intro to Film Studies (coursework emphasized the representation of minority groups in film), Minorities & Movies, African American History II, Historical Methods (term paper: “African Americans in Film”), Survey of Film and Culture, American Literature II (emphasis on minority publications), Digital History, Women in Literature, Recent American History 1929-2945 (term paper: Women and the Great Depression: Literary and Everyday Experience).

Awards

Graduate Dean Citation Award

University of Louisville PAS Graduate Assistantship

Woodford R. Porter Scholars- Full Scholarship

African American Heritage Center Scholarship Franklin-Simpson Historical Society Scholarship

The Richard B. Lewis & Constance L. Lewis Education Scholarship
(SGA) Staff Member of the Year

University Involvement

Graduate

Political Art & Activism Panel Discussion: Spring 2018

Responsibilities: Coordinated, planned, and orchestrated the panel participants and event details for discussion of politics, art, and public space at the Cressman Center.

Art & Feminism: Representation of Women Artists in Louisville Museums: Fall 2017

Responsibilities: Conducted research on the percentage of women represented within artwork and as artists at the Speed Art Museum. Research project was published in the form of a digital map.

Kentucky Center for African American Heritage Research Assistant: Spring 2017-

Present: Responsibilities: Conduct research for KCCAH exhibit and analyze data regarding sites of civil rights activity in Kentucky. Produce research and data for the civil rights interactive digital map.

Speed Art Museum Guest Speaker: Spring 2017

Responsibilities: Present on the film *I Am Not Your Negro* as well as facilitate discussion and provide information regarding James Baldwin and his role in the civil rights movement.

Graduate Research Assistant Fall 2016- Present:

Dr. Tyler Fleming- University of Louisville Department of History/Pan-African Studies Responsibilities: Identify relevant materials in archives across Louisville and the nearby area. Research history of Louisville's African American population. Transdisciplinary Social Justice Research Consortium- Ann Braden Institute Responsibilities: Assist Program Manager in organizing information for social justice research projects at the university. Administrative tasks such as: data input, budget analysis, software management

Dr. Pearlie Johnson – University of Louisville Department of Art History/Pan-African Studies

Responsibilities: Conduct research and teaching duties for Dr. Pearlie Johnson. Duties include research organization, teaching assistant, grading, filing, and presenting.

Undergraduate

University of Louisville Cultural Center Intern: 2012- 2013

Responsibilities: Performed multiple duties such as sitting on various diversity boards, attending multicultural events throughout the university and the community, presenting information about the Cultural Center and a variety of other multicultural-based organizations. In addition, I worked under the department head, Michael Anthony, and aided in the research of diversity, multiculturalism, and race on the University of Louisville's campus.

Student Government Association (SGA) Multicultural Staff Associate: 2010-2011

Responsibilities: Increased the awareness and activity of diversity at the University of Louisville, met and collaborated with multicultural organizations throughout UofL to document status, concern, and advancement of the RSO (registered student organization), cultivated an appreciation for diversity within SGA and advocated for representation from multicultural groups within the organization, coordinated activities for first year international students which included, but was not limited to, a field trip to World Fest and video screenings of international films. Due to my work in this position, I was awarded the SGA Staff Member of the Year.

Secretary of the American International Relations Club (AIRC): 2010-2012

Responsibilities: Primary duties included preparing for the annual AIRC banquet. Performed tasks such as booking the talent and entertainment for the banquet, ordering internationally based food, celebrating with sponsors and other organizations to help fund event, promote the banquet to other RSO organizations and the community, preparing plans for the set up and flow of the banquet. Other tasks outside of the banquet included, assisted first semester international students, helped with miscellaneous administrative tasks around the AIRC office, and attended other multicultural events as a representative of the AIRC.

Society of Porter's Scholars 2009-2012

Responsibilities: Participated in various events, attended meetings, speeches, and seminars, volunteered with orientation of incoming Porter Scholars, completed 10 hours of community service per semester.

Non- University Involvement

Film Festival Judge at Manual High School: Fall 2017

Responsibilities: Due to background in film and humanities, I was selected by Manual high school to judge their student led short film festival. Responsibilities included

Dream Land Journal Film Committee 2012-2013

Responsibilities: Conducted interviews for upcoming journal publications, edited and reviewed submitted article pieces, promoted and advertised publications of the journal, viewed and researched several films for information to incorporate within the journal publications, attended film screenings throughout the Louisville community and events put on through the Louisville Film Society.

Sojourn Seed Ministry 2012-2013

Responsibilities: Responded to the needs of the Shelby Park/Germantown community, aided in community outreach and relationship building, assisted with the planning and organization of the Sojourn Medical Clinics, followed up with attendees of the Sojourn Medical Clinic, attended events hosted by the church, provided food for events targeted towards the community, strategized on specific outreach tactics.

Nadus Films Production Assistant Intern 2012

Responsibilities: Worked closely with director of Nadus Films to coordinate events, organized and prepared information for upcoming film festivals, cast talent for film sets and shoots, promoted their latest production BBoy for Life.

Film Publications/ Awards

“It Takes a Village” 2013

Position: Director, Director of Cinematography, Editor Course: Video Communication Award: Best Short Film. The short film is still used in this course as an example of a successful short film.

“Heavy Furniture” 2013

Position: Director, Editor Course: Survey of Film and Culture Award: Best Short Film

“The Letter” 2013

Position: Director, Director of Cinematography Course: Film Adaptations and Remakes Award: Most Original Short Film

“Hi, Hello” 2012

Position: Actress, Production Assistant Course: Intro to Film Studies Award: Best Cinematography

Related Work/Volunteer Experience:

Miscellaneous Photography/Filmography: 2012-Present

Volunteer Responsibilities: Photograph and film important university and community events which include, but is not limited to, Martin Luther King Day of Service, SAB reception, UofL Conferences, BAREfit Personal Training, etc.

The Housing Partnership, Inc. 2015-2016

Position: Administrative Assistant Responsibilities: Facilitate and assist the operations of the Community Resource Center, provide information about homeownership education, credit counseling, and budget building, spear head customer relations as an ambassador for the company, manage social media for the organization, initiate and create unique ways to service our clients which are predominantly Section 8 recipients and immigrants.

O'Bryan Brown and Toner, PLLC 2012

Position: File Clerk, Secretary Responsibilities: Assisted with organizing and sorting clientele files, aided in translating for Spanish speaking clients by taking their calls and gathering information in Spanish, managed and facilitated efficient relationships between clients and attorneys.

Memberships:

Pan-African Studies Graduate Student Association (PGSA)
Kentucky Yoga Initiative
Louisville United (Books and Breakfast)
Hope for the Holidays Committee
Chairman for the Health and Wellness Group.